

Developing Artistry in Teaching: New Approaches to Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT. This paper is based on the view that teaching can be seen as an art. Drawing on the works of the philosophers Rudolf Steiner and John Dewey, as well as on those of educators such as Elliot Eisner, Seymour Sarason and Maxine Greene, a position is advanced in which developing a teacher's artistry becomes a central focus of teacher education. In this context the role of pedagogical intuition is considered to be essential. Through examining concrete examples of in-service courses in theatre clowning for Steiner School foreign language teachers and the Lincoln Center Institute summer programs, different concepts of developing artistry in teaching will be elucidated in which the experience and practice of the arts play a decisive role in teacher training.

Keywords: art of teaching, Waldorf, Steiner Schools, clowning, improvisation, Lincoln Center Institute

Viewing Teaching as an Art

What forms of knowledge and experience does a teacher need to become the best teacher she is capable of becoming? This question is inevitably the starting point of all considerations of teacher education. This paper is based on the view that teaching is an art and that seen from this perspective a teacher's training should offer her the optimal possibilities of developing her artistry in teaching.

Considering teaching as an art implies adopting a requisite framework of knowledge. A musician's sensitivity to nuances of tone, an actor's to voice and gesture, a painter's to colour and line, all represent forms of knowledge and expression, which do not lend themselves easily to rational, scientific discourse. Nor do they represent that type of knowledge, which most educational research and theory have propagated as essential in teacher education, or, for that matter, for pupils in their schooling. At the same time they are all, incontrovertibly, examples of highly precise and expressive ways of knowing and acting. Waldorf education is based on a view of teaching in which such forms of artistic knowledge and capabilities are considered to be highly significant for both pupils and teachers and thus also essential elements in teacher education. Rudolf Steiner's view of education as an art (*Erziehungskunst*) and the teacher as an artist (*Erziehungskünstler*) is one of the central motives going through all his educational writings (Steiner, 2004). Viewing teaching as an art, however, is naturally not a uniquely Waldorf perspective. It is a view of teaching which has also been extensively discussed and developed by a number of educators particularly in an Anglo-American context (Dewey, 1980; Sarason, 1999; Rubin, 1985; Eisner, 1985; Greene, 2001). One of its most noted proponents has been Elliot Eisner. In a chapter called "On the Art of Teaching" Eisner explains the four reasons which lead him to define teaching as an art:

"First, it is an art in the sense that teaching can be performed with such skill and grace that, for the student as for the teacher, the experience can be justifiably characterized as aesthetic. (...)

Second, teaching is an art in the sense that teachers, like painters, composers, actresses, and dancers, make

judgements based on qualities that unfold during the course of action. (...)

Third, teaching is an art in the sense that the teacher's activity is not dominated by prescriptions or routines, but is influenced by qualities and contingencies that are unpredicted. (...)

Fourth, teaching is an art in the sense that the ends it achieves are often created in process. (...)

It is in these four senses – teaching as a source of aesthetic experience, as dependent on the perception and control of qualities, as a heuristic, or adventitious activity, and as seeking emergent ends – that teaching can be regarded as an art.” (Eisner, 1985, p. 175-177)

The perspectives which Eisner has presented address different, but related aspects of the process of teaching itself, emphasizing its aesthetic, creative, dynamic and indeterminate nature. Establishing parallels between such processes in the arts and in teaching creates a framework in which the paradigms of the arts also become attainable for teachers within their specific professional context.

It is apparent that in each of the aspects that Eisner has elucidated pedagogical intuition can be seen as a crucial and common element. Within a continually changing classroom situation, making judgements “based on qualities that unfold during the course of action” in which “the ends it achieves are often created in process” can only be conceived of on the basis of flexible, situation-based decisions and not on the strict implementation of preconceived plans. The shifting, unpredictable dynamics of a classroom situation and the requisite abilities to make immediate and appropriate choices in such a manner that “grace” in teaching can be achieved are invariably dependent on the human capacity for intuition. It is this unique capability which Konrad Lorenz has described as “the practically unlimited capacity for taking in relevant details and leaving out the irrelevant ones” (Lorenz, 1951, p. 170) that teachers continually need to draw on in the classroom. In the context of Waldorf education, pedagogical intuition is viewed as the ‘instrument’ through which a teacher is able to achieve a healthy balance for her pupils between concentration and expansion, between the development of the imagination and of memory, between ‘breathing in’ and ‘breathing out’ (Steiner, 2004). In his illuminating work *Artists of the Invisible* Allan Kaplan discusses the essential requirements for its realization:

“Intuition is not intangible or mysterious; it is the simultaneous perception of the whole. We must learn (or relearn) to do this. (...) There are many ways of developing the capacity to see holistically, to see the living whole, to read and understand the meaning which lies invisible yet fully revealed all around us; as Goethe put it, nature is an open secret. All these ways have to do with developing our capacity for observation, reflection and participation. Though we are looking for that which lies beyond the sense particulars, nevertheless we do not see it through abstracting, generalising and intellectualising. We are looking to develop an intimacy which discloses the world.” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 32)

Such intuitive processes in teaching are dependent on different aspects of perception, experience and knowledge. Although these must certainly include a clear understanding of one's subject along with a broad methodological repertoire, knowledge of a subject and its methodology do not, in themselves, offer a sufficient basis for the development of intuition. The question which educators such as Eisner have consistently struggled with is how precisely those intuitive capabilities which they have deemed so decisive, can be developed in teachers in the course of their training. In the following sections of this paper, two different approaches to addressing this question will be examined: the first example is taken from the context of Waldorf education and the second from an arts programme in New York City.

Developing the Artistry of the Teacher through Theatre Clowning and Improvisation

In Waldorf teacher education, the experience and practice of a wide range of arts has traditionally played a significant role, drawing on Steiner's understanding of artistic development as an essential aspect in realizing artistry in teaching. In the last fifteen years a new framework has been created in the in-service training of Steiner School foreign language teachers at the annual *English Week*, in which teachers are trained in different modalities of the theatre arts, including drama, storytelling, speech formation, theatre directing and

theatre clowning (Lutzker, 2007, p. 74-82). In my book, *The Art of Foreign Language Teaching: Improvisation and Drama in Teacher Development and Language Learning* (2007), I examined the particular significance of in-service theatre clowning and improvisation courses for foreign language teachers taught by the renowned clown Vivian Gladwell (Lutzker, 2007, p. 88-184). Viewed both within the broader framework of considering teaching as an art and in terms of exploring how intuitive capabilities in teaching can be concretely developed, this research can be considered as highly relevant for all teachers.

Theatre clowning, as opposed to circus clowning, is designed for the stage and is based on traditions developed by Jacques Lecoq in France (Lecoq, 2002). One of its leading practitioners, Jean-Bernard Bonange, has characterized the clown as embodying the duality of being firmly grounded on the earth and at the same time wholly free in being able to discover her unlimited imaginative possibilities in every moment:

“In clowning we rediscover that same child-like sense of playfulness which allows us, with fear and pleasure, to open the door to our imagination. (...) Being a clown is more than a state, it is a movement, a dynamic process - it is even a two-way movement: feet on the ground and head in the clouds. It is this duality, which facilitates the emergence of the imagination.

Feet on the ground means remaining alert, all senses alive, to the concrete and objective reality that surrounds us. When we smell, see, hear and touch, we open ourselves to being touched by the presence of the world. This presence in concrete reality is the basis for the clown's imagination. As with the child's symbolic play, the clown finds at the heart of objects, of bodies, of actions and of space, - a gold mine.” (Bonange, 1996)

The first and golden rule of theatre clowning is not to prepare or plan anything before coming on stage. Facing this challenge of letting go of all preconceived plans in order to become totally open to what will develop in a given moment is thus a crucial aspect of what the teachers gradually learn to do during these workshops. After many hours of carefully designed warm-up exercises, participants have their first solo-improvisation which consists of putting on the clown's red nose and going out alone onto a stage which is empty except for a few simple objects such as a blanket and a chair. For most teachers, having to step out in front of their group consisting of 12-16 participants without any intentions whatsoever caused deep fears of what might happen, or more often of what might *not* happen. The entire passage of time before one's first solo-improvisation began and then the first tentative steps onto the waiting stage became for all participants fearful and existential moments of confronting an emptiness in the room and within themselves. The continual injunction of the course leader to trust that the objects on stage and the presence of the audience in the room will somehow 'speak to you', invariably remained only a theory until it was personally experienced; yet when these 'dialogues' between object and participant and participant and audience actually occurred, they often had the force of a revelation. One teacher later wrote:

“Letting things simply happen without knowing what was happening was initially – and each time anew – accompanied by fears. Ultimately, other people were watching while I was fully exposed in that moment and had no idea what embarrassments were in store for me, or worse still – perhaps I had nothing to offer and would be standing in front of strangers (who were expecting something from me) and nothing was going to happen?!

These fears could only be overcome by confronting them. Bearing this moment and consciously waiting to see what it had to offer while I stepped over the line into an unknown and unplanned realm brought unexpected experiences: when I allowed myself to enter into the exercise I became one with the situation and then I became inwardly calm and peaceful – something that three seconds earlier I had thought inconceivable. Through letting what that moment held for me simply happen, not only did acts occur, but also feelings associated with these acts that were unexpected and totally different from what I had felt only a few seconds earlier. Every time I stepped over that line a unique and 'authentic' interaction occurred between the things in the room (including smells, sounds and voices) and the way I dealt with them (both inwardly and outwardly). On closer observation, it was not that I actually dealt with these things but rather that they dealt with me and I didn't have to do anything except to be open to them. D.K. English Week 1999, 2003” (Lutzker, 2007, p. 135)

Although obviously each participant had his or her unique and, in the very nature of clowning unrepeatable experience/s, a number of parallels in their reports are apparent. The themes that consistently reappear are a heightened receptivity to the moment, a feeling of flow, new dimensions of contact with others, an

acceptance of one's self, and a deep feeling of openness and liberation. Despite the fleeting and ephemeral qualities of such moments, participants were generally able to articulate what they had experienced.

"Then I realised that one of the most important things is to be receptive, attentive in listening to one's senses, one's physical body and the world around. When you find this state, when you manage to follow Vivian's request not to come on stage with an idea what to do, a fixed plan, then you feel that something is being realised in you, and you are as if carried by a flow beyond yourself. You are not the same any more, you can hear and perceive more, you become more alive. T.L Baltic Seminar" (Ibid., p. 137)

"To discover a few miraculous seconds of ego loss is extremely liberating. I likened it to Zen. It has a sort of harshness that is beneficial. It cuts through to the "true you". It is the one hand clapping, the tree falling down unseen in the forest. It is, in fact, extremely difficult to describe. It has to be experienced in the laboratory of one's own nervous system. S.P. English Week 2004" (Ibid., p. 138)

The long-term effects of these courses on both a personal and professional level appeared in almost all of their reports. Many participants also drew direct connections to their work as teachers:

"This 'living for the moment', 'living absolutely in the present' is the situation the teacher is in at every moment in every lesson at school. We must constantly 'expect the unexpected'. A successful coping with such a situation can often be the highlight of a lesson, as experienced teachers will confirm. This practicing and honing of one's power to 'really live in the present' is, for this reason, very useful for the teacher." D.N. English Week 2004" (Ibid., p.143)

"At a primary level of experience, clowning offers an intensive training of perception. Out of nothing, I try to bring forth a small world or an imaginary space – using only the power of my voice and my imagination – in which I can 'rediscover' with the children in the foreign language, the world that they naturally know in the words of their mother tongue. With wonder, enthusiasm, even with reverence we discover things and creatures anew... F.C. Schloss Hamborn 1998, 1999, English Fortnight 2000, Witten 2003" (Ibid., p. 144)

"Clowning was something totally new for me. Actually I feared it at first. I have never thought in the beginning of a course that I would be able to do something I have never prepared or planned. And (!) in front of people whom I scarcely know. Vivian's course helped me a lot to change my personality or it at least started, gave an impulse to this process. To gain more courage to do things I have never tried before – and of course – in the classroom during my English lessons. To push the boundaries of abilities and possibilities. To face the unexpected without fear. To enjoy it. To embrace it. I'm still working upon the last now. T.E. English Week 2004" (Ibid., p. 140)

The nature of the clowning and improvisation courses and what the participants learned from them illuminate that framework of knowledge intrinsic to viewing teaching as an art. This is also true with respect to what was learned by teachers in the drama, storytelling, directing and speech formation courses which were also offered. In all of these courses, by focusing on the teacher's artistic and expressive development within the broader context of learning how to express a work of literature, processes are instigated which can have far-ranging implications not only for the way literature is experienced, but also for how it will later be taught. Judging from what participants have written over the years on their feedback sheets, there is good reason to believe that they experienced comparable breakthroughs in many of the other theatre arts courses which have been offered. In what respects do the effects of these courses parallel those studied in theatre clowning? In what respects are they different and possibly complementary? These are questions which call for further research.

The long-term significance which the theatre clowning courses had for almost all of the participants raise additional questions as well. These courses were held in the context of in-service training weeks for foreign language teachers and generally went on for three hours a day over the course of five days. What possible benefits could be gained from substantially expanding the amount and duration of such courses? A further question would be whether results would be comparable with younger participants taking such courses as a part of their initial university training. Could such artistic courses help to ease the kinds of difficulties, which novice language teachers usually encounter in their first years of teaching?

Another far-ranging question concerns the broader relevance of such an artistic training for *all* teachers. From the perspective of viewing teaching as an art, the kind of knowledge that teachers need in order to be able to attain artistry in their field is of a substantially different nature than those forms of knowledge which traditional university education programmes propagate. This necessarily implies a revision of curriculum and more fundamentally, creating a different framework of learning in which artistic practice becomes a crucial part of learning to become a teacher. Can one imagine theatre arts courses as an essential component of the general training of teachers, helping them to become professional artists in the classroom, in a manner to some degree comparable to which an art college, drama school, or music conservatory prepares their students for professional artistic careers in their respective fields? (Kiersch, 1992, p. 115)

In attempting to address some of these questions, there are illuminating parallels which can be drawn by considering the work of the Lincoln Center Institute in New York City.

The Lincoln Center Institute

Initiated by Maxine Greene over 35 years ago, the Lincoln Center Institute offers professional training programmes for teachers focusing on the arts, most notably in the form of its yearly summer sessions which attract teachers from all over the United States. During three-week courses, teachers are offered the opportunity to intensively immerse themselves in different arts including music, theatre, dance and poetry.

The clearest parallel to the above-mentioned programmes for foreign language teachers is the common focus placed on ‘hands on’ work and the intensive artistic practice led by experts in these fields. The main difference between these programmes can be seen in the fact that the Lincoln Center Institute offers courses for all teachers whatever their subject, and in their intensity and length: it is a three week programme which focuses solely on artistic work, as opposed, for instance, to the English Week, which takes place over the course of only one week and which also offers lectures on educational themes and methodology courses. Another difference is the broader range of art forms which are offered at the Lincoln Center Institute including, for example, the visual arts and dance.

For Greene, artistic work and learning offers a basis of affective, cognitive and embodied experience which she views as a paradigm for all education:

“I believe that the learning provoked by what we call aesthetic education is paradigmatic for the learning many of us would like to see. Learning stimulated by the desire to explore, to find out, to go in search. This is the learning that goes beyond teaching – the only significant learning, I believe. It is self-initiated at some point, permeated by wonder, studded by moments of questioning, always with the sense that there is something out there, something worthwhile beyond.” (Greene 2001, p. 46-47)

An element unique to the Lincoln Center programme lies in the effort made to help participants to attain a deeper level of appreciation of specific works of art, which the participants are then able to directly experience in the course of their time in New York City. Maxine Greene explains what this form of preparation entails and why she deems it to be so necessary:

“People must be empowered to notice what is there to be noticed. They must know what it is to move within paintings and among the masses of sculptures, to live in music, to attend to bodies in motion on a stage – not solely with eyes and mind, but with nerves and muscles and pulsing blood. What I have in mind is not art appreciation in any of its customary senses: appreciation imposed on passive people sitting still to be improved. Nor am I talking about anything that can be easily subsumed under art history or the humanities. Affective education does not describe it; nor is it to be understood as a predominantly intellectualized engagement – musicological, literary critical, philosophical, aesthetical – with selected works in the artistic domains.

It can be called aesthetic education; it can be called education in being present, personally present as imagining, feeling, perceiving, thinking beings to works of art.” (Ibid., p. 203)

It is in this context that the arts are seen to offer unparalleled opportunities for developing perceptual and expressive capabilities:

“We need to hold in mind the fact that the arts are almost always inexhaustible. There is no using up of a painting or a concerto or a poem. If they have any richness, any density at all, they are inexhaustible, there is always more.” (Ibid., p. 206)

At the heart of this entire programme lies an underlying conviction that this form of aesthetic education offers unique opportunities in terms of teachers initiating their own personal and professional growth:

“...clearly, each of us has to be there in person and fully present if dance is to come alive, if the landscape is to fulfil itself, if the sonata is to run its course, if the poem is to be achieved. We cannot send our representatives to see *The Magic Flute* for us or a Motherwell drawing or *The Prodigal Son*, or any of the works I have named.” (Ibid., 207)

Viewing aesthetic education as an ideal, the task of the teacher is thus transformed from imparting knowledge, into creating opportunities for pupils to become immersed in those dimensions of learning that the teachers were able to engage in themselves. At the core of this vision lies a belief in the individual and biographical will of the pupils to grasp such opportunities of growth when they are presented to them:

“Surely you recognize that this kind of thing seldom happens naturally. Situations have to be created that release the energies required, that provoke interest, that move persons to reach beyond themselves. (...) With this in mind, we can somehow trust that, if we have taught how to search and let them catch some gleam of the untraveled, they will find their own ways, as we have done, and begin teaching themselves, pursuing their own possibilities.” (Ibid, p. 47)

Finally, it is the richness of the arts which enables its active practice to become a catalyst for transforming habits of thinking, feeling and being. Thus in learning to meet the varied demands which the arts make on an individual, there exist unique possibilities for both teachers and pupils to learn to perceive and participate in the world in a deeply enhanced manner. It is this connection between artistic experience and personal development that lies at the heart of Greene’s understanding of a meaningful education:

“Most significantly, I think we too often forget that the primary purpose of education is to free persons to make sense of their actual lived situations – not only cognitively, but perceptually, imaginatively, affectively – to attend mindfully to their own lives, to take their own initiatives in interpreting them and finding out where the deficiencies are and trying to transform them.” (Ibid., p. 206)

In establishing rich and manifold connections between the study of the arts and teacher education, Greene has not only elucidated what it means to view teaching as an art, but in creating the Lincoln Center Institute has also designed a framework in which such connections can be put into practice. At the same time, out of a deep understanding of the possibilities intrinsic to the study of the arts, she has also developed a vision in which a teacher’s experience and practice of the arts is not merely justified here for its own sake as *l’art pour la art* – but, finally, for the sake of others – the children and young people waiting in their classrooms.

A New Paradigm for Teacher Education in 2020?

The fundamental question which this paper raises with respect to teacher education in 2020 is whether the different views and programmes discussed here will remain isolated examples well outside the mainstream, or whether such forms of artistic experience and learning can be seen as future models for teacher education that can be learned from and further developed. For the coming generations of teachers and their pupils this is not a theoretical question, but an eminently practical one and the consequences are far-reaching. The case being made here is that to enable teachers to help their pupils to take meaningful and transformative steps in their learning, teachers need to be given the chance in their training to learn to take such steps for themselves. It is a case which bears hearing.

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